

A TIME TO BE *Silent*

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In the course of slightly more than a half century since Vatican II, practice has revealed those moments in our liturgical ritual that we can safely claim to “own.” Each week we gather with the faith community to which we belong. As individuals, and as community, we become what we receive in the sacrament of our Lord’s body and blood. We know when to sit and stand, how and when to bow, genuflect, and embrace one another in the peace of Christ. We confidently profess our faith with one voice, and we do so in a language we can understand. As a people of ritual sound and motion, we approach that fully conscious and active participation to which we are led.

Given that we are already accustomed to moving through our days surrounded by sound and motion, it is understandable that we find it natural to pray the moving and voiced parts of our liturgy. By contrast, silence and stillness are not as common to our daily experience. This could explain why some individuals and communities are uneasy with, and therefore resist entering into and sustaining, meaningful periods of silence in public worship. Thanks to the ubiquitous electronic devices that lie waiting close at hand, many people enjoy instantaneous connectivity to the people with whom they work, socialize, and live. One byproduct can be that incessant cacophony systemic to life as we know it. We choose this reality, but grow restless with the fifteen seconds of silence between the epistle and the Gospel acclamation. Our devices may provide comfort, but they cannot explain why we find it so hard to be silent before God.

People experience silence in several different ways. There is the silence that precedes the arrival of eagerly anticipated news. People in long-term relationships are familiar with those times when no conversation is necessary, though these can just as easily be filled with peaceful contentment as with anger or sadness. Silence can be a restorative component of intimate communication, and it can rescue us from the temptation to say too much. The absence of speech is not the same as silence. We have all found ourselves in conversational settings that include one person simply waiting for a lull so the other can begin. This sort of silence rarely includes true attentiveness.

If we were to identify two general ways in which we understand silence, we might distinguish between that which is impatient and that which is receptive. In prayer, receptive silence is that state of being open to what God has to say to us. It reminds

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us that the many matters that command our attention, no matter how urgent they may seem, are fleeting and small in the context of the eternal love and desire that awaits us in the very heart of God.

By graceful design, the liturgy provides a time to speak and a time to be silent. We know how to speak and sing and move. But these audible and physical elements are only part of our sacred duty in the liturgy. In conversation with the God who is waiting and listening, we must practice if we hope to gain proficiency in our work of receptive silence.

A few years ago I joined a dance class at the local hula *halau*. I have found this place to be wonderfully communal and welcoming. The esteemed *kumu hula* is loved by her students. The authority of her instruction is balanced perfectly with loving compassion, even for clumsy fledglings such as myself. The basic hula steps seemed impossible for me to execute at first, and I nearly gave up more than a few times. But as the months proceeded, the other dancers encouraged and taught me by example. I still strive for the grace and fluidity I see in their movement. But my determination to progress has more or less prevailed, and my impatience has gradually diminished. I am now able to move in unison with the other students, mimicking each turn of the head, every dip, each *‘uwehe*. It became obvious that I could not simply show up for class, and, without the benefit of daily practice, expect to fall into step with the others. It had been many decades since I was a beginner at singing or playing the piano. With hula I had to learn all over again what it means to be a novice, to submit to the rudiments. It has been a humbling journey for me, and one that has benefitted my spiritual life as well. I now see a similarity in the learned discipline of receptive silence. Silence cannot wait all week, or be reserved only for certain times in weekend liturgy. It must be practiced each day, requiring at least the same attention we devote to the people we love and pursuits we cherish.

In our public worship, the Liturgy of the Word provides us with an anticipated opportunity to engage in receptive silence. But how well do we forsake our personal thoughts and distractions so as to benefit from this time? As one who serves as music minister for three to four liturgies every weekend, I am the first to admit that my attention wanders, and my silences grow impatient. I pray for the discipline to be mindful and attentive, even when the brand new PA system is feeding back, babies are squalling, and half the choir men are downstairs making pancakes. Distractions and disappointments are real, but they pass.

Silence, while it is free to us for the taking, does not come naturally. When we make ourselves available to silence, we encounter the One who patiently waits to get a word in edgewise. But receptive silence cannot be reliably achieved without daily practice during the course of our day-to-day prayer life. Receptive silence will never seek to find us. We must value and desire it so much that we pursue it, and do so with joy.

Silence in the Liturgy

From the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)*

Sacred silence also, as part of the celebration, is to be observed at the designated times (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 30). Its nature, however, depends on the moment when it occurs in the different parts of the celebration. For in the Penitential Act and again after the invitation to pray, individuals recollect themselves; whereas after a reading or after the Homily, all meditate briefly on what they have heard; then after Communion, they praise God in their hearts and pray to him.

Even before the celebration itself, it is a praiseworthy practice for silence to be observed in the church, in the sacristy, in the vesting room, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred celebration in a devout and fitting manner (45).

By silence and by singing, the people make this divine word their own, and affirm their adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith (55).

The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to favor meditation, and so any kind of haste such as hinders recollection is clearly to be avoided. In the course of it, brief periods of silence are also appropriate, accommodated to the assembled congregation; by means of these, under the action of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. It may be appropriate to observe such periods of silence, for example, before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, after the First and Second Reading, and lastly at the conclusion of the Homily (56).

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